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## Obstacles to Leadership – Ourselves, Our Bad Habits and Our Blind Spots

By David Sorin



When the business press writes about “corporate heroes” like Jack Welch or Bill Gates, we hear about their extraordinary competencies: their vision, passion, and charisma. The talk is all about their strengths. There is an entire school of thought led by writers such as Marcus Buckingham that focus primarily on developing leadership skills through focus and expansion of one’s strengths.

Yet, no matter what the strengths are of individuals seeking to rise in the corporate world, many fail to make it to the top because they remain painfully unaware of their flaws. Two recent books discuss these flaws and offer strategies for change.

The first is *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* (Hyperion, 2007) by Marshall Goldsmith, who is arguably the most famous executive coach in our country. Goldsmith speaks of “the success delusion:” we get positive reinforcement from our past successes and, in a mental leap that we find easy to justify, we assume that our past success is predictive of great success in the future. This becomes a serious liability in that we fail to notice that some of our habits are actually holding us back.

Goldsmith lists a total of twenty one flaws, and it amazing how mundane they appear to be. These flaws appear benign as individuals begin their ascent through the ranks, but they become more noticeable and influential the higher the position.

They include behaviors such as passing judgment and making destructive comments, passing the buck and claiming undeserved credit, failing to give proper recognition and playing favorites. We are

all guilty of such behaviors on occasion. Ultimately, some of these behaviors can be fatal to our careers as they become toxic habits.

Claudia Shelton's new book is *Blind Spots* (John Wiley, 2007). She identifies the five most common blind spots as:

- 1. Misusing strengths - how we ineffectively use our strengths, in many cases overusing them**
- 2. Old habits - how we repeat outdated behavior and inflexible ways of thinking and acting**
- 3. Stress expressed - how we negatively express the stress we feel**
- 4. Un-tuned radar - how we misread other people and their nonverbal cues, which leads to misinterpreted intentions**
- 5. Disconnecting - how we fail to communicate**

Both authors are focused on deficiencies that can keep individuals from becoming effective leaders. Both offer frameworks for gaining awareness of flaws and correcting them.

In simple terms, each author recommends 360 degree feedback. This involves getting objective information from an individual's superiors, peers and direct reports, processing it and then accepting the challenge of working on yourself.

It is interesting to realize that based on these books, we are our own biggest obstacle to getting to the top. In many cases, we cannot overcome our deficiencies on our own. Many have developed a relationship with a trusted advisor, who will always give honest feedback and constructive criticism.

Some work with executive coaches to bring flaws to light to work on eradicating them. The trick is to become aware of where we don't measure up so that we can do something about it. Rather than burying one's head in the sand, it is critical that each individual get accurate and appropriate feedback. It is tough to change if there is no knowledge of what needs changing. Honest self-appraisal may be a piece of what is needed, but it is not nearly enough.

Learn about your blind spots. Focus on the ones that may be holding you back. Remember, leaders are made, not born.

***About the author:***

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